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SUBJECT: SPATE OF HATE CRIMES RESULTS IN WORDS BUT LIMITED ACTION

REF: MOSCOW 159

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A string of deadly hate crimes committed since the beginning of the year has alarmed NGOs and compelled Putin to speak out against xenophobia and nationalism. If the rate of fatalities resulting from hate crimes continues through the end of the year, the total number will be twice that reported in 2007. NGOs which track nationalism and xenophobia called remarks by Putin windowdressing. At the same time, the main NGO which tracks hate crimes notes improvements in Moscow. End summary.

NEW YEAR GETS OFF TO A BAD START  
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¶2. (U) Since the beginning of 2008, 17 people have been killed and more than 50 injured in hate-related attacks in Russia, according to the Sova Center, which tracks hate-motivated crimes. If the rate of fatal hate crimes were to continue through the end of the year, the result would be a total of 135 xenophobic killings -- double the number reported in 2007 (reftel). This alarming trend and the extremely violent nature of the crimes committed have caused GOR officials, including Putin and Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov, to speak out.

¶3. (U) The Moscow Prosecutor's Office has recorded 16 crimes committed on ethnic grounds since January 1. Nearly all of them were committed by groups of youth, aged 12 to 19 years, who attacked their victims from behind with knives. While acknowledging a problem, Vladimir Pronin, head of the Department of Internal Affairs for the City of Moscow, insisted in news reports that there is no organized network of skinheads in Moscow. He said there are only separate groups that communicate through the Internet. The victims were predominantly from CIS countries, with many coming from Kyrgyzstan.

¶4. (U) Some incidents in Moscow include the following:

-On January 16, a young person from Kyrgyzstan died in a Moscow park as the result of 23 knife wounds.

-On January 17, a young person from Kyrgyzstan was attacked in the Moscow region and suffered 36 knife wounds.

-On January 29, a young man and woman from Kyrgyzstan were attacked in Moscow by three people who were subsequently arrested. The young man died from knife wounds. The young woman survived and was hospitalized with 9 knife wounds.

-On January 31, an ethnic Tajik with Uzbek citizenship was attacked by two assailants in the center of Moscow. He received 12 knife wounds.

-On February 6, the body of a 30-year old from Kyrgyzstan was

found in Moscow with 30 knife wounds.

-On February 12, the corpse of a 20-year old native of Kabardino-Balkariya was found in a garage in Moscow with numerous knife wounds.

-On February 14, two Tajik citizens were attacked in the center of Moscow by five teenagers with knives. One of the victims died.

15. (SBU) Sova Center's Galina Kozhevnikova told us the reason for the high number of attacks against people from Kyrgyzstan is not that they are being specifically targeted. "These are the people in Moscow who generally work cleaning streets and courtyards and they usually work alone. This makes them easy targets for skinheads," she said.

#### SPEAKING OUT BUT DOING LITTLE

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16. (U) Speaking at the opening of an informal summit of leaders of CIS countries on February 22, Putin declared that Russia is prepared to fight xenophobia, intolerance and threats to citizens from CIS countries. "We will do everything to make sure these criminals are found, tried and punished," Putin said. "Citizens in the CIS, including Russians, are now encountering a resurgence of xenophobia, intolerance and even threats to their lives," Putin said and acknowledged that nearly all CIS presidents had raised the issue with him. Days earlier, Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov met with militia leaders to discuss the problem. Ella Pamfilova, Chair of the President's Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, said there is "political will to solve this problem," given the attention it has received.

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17. (SBU) Others saw the government's response as wholly inadequate. Kozhevnikova dismissed Putin's remarks as "merely a public display of government action," and said there are no real efforts taking place to address xenophobia. "Putin and Mayor Luzhkov only pay attention when hate crimes occur in the center of Moscow. All other incidents are essentially ignored." Aleksandr Verkhovskiy, also of the Sova Center, said earlier this year that the Russian government is "first and foremost concerned with stability and xenophobia and hate crimes are not perceived by leaders in the Kremlin as a threat." William Smirnov, also of the President's Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, accused the Kremlin of encouraging tension among those who are not doing well economically and channeling their energy against various ethnic groups who make easy targets. Valeriy Tishkov, Director of the Institute of Ethnology of the Russian Academy of Sciences and a member of the Public Chamber has said increased migration from former Soviet republics has fed a perception that ethnic Russians are targeted for attacks in the Caucasus.

#### SOME SUCCESS IN THE COURTROOM

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18. (SBU) Kozhevnikova praised the Moscow prosecutor's office for obtaining guilty verdicts against perpetrators of some of these crimes. In 2008, there have been at least eight guilty verdicts against eight people. The most high profile of these verdicts was against Maksim Martsinkevich (alias Tesak), the leader of the neo-nazi group "Format 18." He was sentenced on February 18 to three years in prison for publicly inciting hatred following an incident in a Moscow club in which he interrupted a political debate and used phrases which were later examined and determined to be "extremist." Prior to his arrest for inciting hatred he was known to have participated in numerous neo-nazi activities including a celebration of Hitler's birthday. His three-year sentence is the most severe to be given for a non-violent crime related to propaganda in Russia. Kozhevnikova posited

that the unusually long sentence could be a reflection of a desire to "unofficially" prosecute him for his other activities. She said his sentencing will be devastating to his followers. "When you remove the leader from the scene, the unity of the group breaks up," she said. She added it is not known for certain who ordered the arrest of Martsinkevich but she speculated it came from the Presidential Administration.

COMMENT

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19. (SBU) While the work of prosecutors is bearing fruit and may reveal a fundamental shift in how seriously they view these crimes, the larger question is when authorities will do something to tackle the societal attitudes that give rise to these violent attacks.

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